

Human Resource Development (HRD) Practices Across Three Continents

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HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT (HRD) PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE ACROSS THREE CONTINENTS

Developmental Paper Submission to the 16th UFHRD International Conference 2015

Stream 5 – Comparative and Cross Cultural Dimensions of HRD

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PURPOSE:

This paper will report progress and findings from the joint International Federation of Training and Development Organisations (IFTDO) and the University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD) project examining HRD professional practice on three continents, namely Africa, Asia and Europe. IFTDO is a multinational, multicultural training and development organization with a diverse global membership, linking HR professionals in HR societies, corporations, universities, consultancies, government organizations and enterprises. IFTDO currently represents more than 500,000 professionals in over 30 countries. The UFHRD is an international association for universities, reflective practitioners, and learning oriented organisations, which seeks to create, develop and inform leading-edge HRD theories and practices by promoting professionally-focused qualifications, co-operative research initiatives and consultancy interventions.

The guiding research questions addressed in the study are as follows.

1. What roles are pursued and adopted by HRD departments in organisations within the three regions?
2. What strategies within HRD departments across the three regions are adopted to realise their role?
3. What are the key results used to assess contribution and performance of HRD departments in the three regions?
4. What are the key driving forces shaping HRD strategies and activities in each of the three regions?
5. What are the factors which inhibit and which facilitate the achievement of HRD goals within the three regions?

These questions will be addressed by three main methods. The first is a systematic literature review. Second is an online survey of HRD professionals facilitated by IFTDO promoting the survey to their member organisations. IFTDO member organisations will in turn distribute a link to the survey and encourage their members to complete. Third is a minimum of two focus group discussions to be again organised with the help of IFTDO and their members. Participants in the focus groups will be HRD professionals from countries in each of the three continents, forming the geographic focus of the project.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF HRD:

Numerous scholars have stressed the importance of considering cultural context when attempting to define HRD (McLean & McLean 2001; Woodall 2005; Wang and Swanson 2008; Wang et al. 2014). A particular challenge for this research project is to recognise, and somehow consolidate, the cultural diversity of the three regions under investigation. Woodhall (2005) comments on the surge of scholarly interest in attempts to define, explore and analyse HRD in different cultural contexts. A crucial element here is the need to take account of the influence and degree of intervention by National Governments, Agencies and other interested bodies. Hamlin and Stewart (2011) examined the lack of clarity in respect of the meanings and boundaries of HRD in general terms, and suggest this is a potential barrier for those wishing to research and theorize in this field. This lack of agreement in general definitions of HRD presents even more of a challenge when attempting to define it in a global context. McLean and McLean (2001) considered whether it is possible (and we would argue whether it is desirable), to define HRD in a global context, suggesting that most attempts to do so are written from a North American perspective. Nevertheless, the recognition of HRD as an expanding field at regional, national and international level, both in the world of industry and academia, reinforces the need for at least a workable definition.

McLean and McLean (2001:322) propose a definition of HRD that could serve as a starting point for discourse and debate in the arena of HRD in an international context:

“HRD is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long-term, has the potential to develop adults’ work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organisation, community, nation, or ultimately, the whole of humanity.”

This does seem a rather lengthy and all-encompassing definition, however, it does capture the essence and potential scope of HRD. Wang and McLean (2007) suggest definitions of international HRD (IHRD) are difficult because HRD is only developed as a discipline in a relatively small number of countries, but this is rapidly changing and may well exist at a practical level in many more countries. Wang and McLean (2007) agree with McLean and McLean (2001) commenting that although the field is most advanced in the U.S. and Europe, it is well established as an academic discipline in countries such as India, Korea and Thailand.

Garvan and Carbery (2012) propose the notion of ‘global HRD’, suggesting this term encompasses a number of interchangeable constructs within the field of international HRD research, such as: ‘national HRD’; ‘international HRD’; ‘comparative HRD’ and ‘cross-cultural HRD’. However, Garavan and Carbery (2012) acknowledge this is not a neat and distinct categorisation. Although our research focuses on a comparative analysis, this cannot be to the exclusion of international and cross-cultural considerations. Garavan and Carbery (2012) argue future research must take account of the influence of globalisation and explore how national, cultural, institutional and regional contexts influence global HRD. Hence the value and

contribution of this study to carry out a comparative analysis of HRD practices across Africa, Asia and Europe, thus building on research in the field and adding to extant knowledge.

RESEARCH DESIGN:

In addition to the development of a comprehensive on-line questionnaire, a Delphi Panel was set up to help determine which countries would be visited for application of the focus group method. The Delphi method was conducted to completion and resulted in four countries being selected. Design, conduct and operation of the Delphi technique will be examined in more detail in the paper. The results were that Germany will be visited for the European continent, both India and Taiwan for Asia and Nigeria for Africa. A second country was selected for Asia because it was also decided by the project sponsors and project team that the Nigerian focus groups will be conducted by skype rather than by a physical visit by the researchers. This freed up time and money to add a second country for Asia. It is important to note that the selected countries are not assumed or claimed to be in any way representative or typical of the continents. The purpose of including focus groups in a single country is simply to gain more in depth data from a country within each of the continents as an example and illustrator of any similarities and differences that are found from the literature and survey within and between continents. It is expected that a number of countries in each continent will participate in the online survey and so this dataset will provide a basis for more generalised conclusions about comparisons of HRD professional practice in the three continents.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS:

The main content of the paper to be presented at the UFHRD Conference will report first on the Delphi study and second on the literature review. The latter has adopted a conceptual framework delineating three important dimensions. The first is the national and international context within

which HRD practice occurs. It is anticipated that there will be both commonalities here across the three continents, because of globalisation and globalising forces and trends, but also differences because of regional, continental and national influences. The second dimension is the role and impact of key actors in national HRD. These include government, employers and their collective bodies, and further and higher education institutions. Again, it is anticipated that similarities and differences will be evident from the extant literature. The final dimension is that of HRD professional practice. We expect to discover commonalities reported in the literature at national, regional and continental level but also, within those broad similarities, differences between economic sectors. Hence we will examine the literature for data on HRD professional practice in private, public and voluntary sectors. Key sources have been identified and include ‘grey literature’ from global supra national bodies such as ILO and other UN agencies; from regional supra national bodies such as the EU; and from national bodies in the countries we visit for the focus groups. Academic literature will include work done on meanings of HRD (Hamlin and Stewart, 2011); on National HRD (NHRD) as a concept (McLean and McLean 2001) as well as studies of NHRD in specific regions and countries (e.g., McLean et al, 2008). Reports of country practices in the leading HRD journals; for example the regular series of these in International Journal of Training and Development; will also be a focus of the review.

Early indications of findings from the empirical stages and methods of the project will also be included in the final paper. These are likely to be limited to results from one or two country visits and focus groups. Thus the paper will include empirical evidence of HRD professional practice in one or two countries. Results from the online survey will not be available but will form part of later papers to be presented at future UFHRD/AHRD European conferences. Hence, this proposal and paper will provide a base for building on reports of the joint IFTDO/UFHRD project as it develops. The project itself is significant for both HRD academics and practitioners

in providing evidence based descriptions of professional practice in three continents and an analysis of similarities and differences. While establishing explanations for similarities and differences is not an aim of the project, the descriptions of professional practice together with continent and country specific context data from the literature, especially the grey literature, will enable and support identification of likely influencing factors. Thus the project will support theorising of HRD as well as provide comparative evidence of HRD practice of value and benefit to practitioners in evaluating their own practice.

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